

NTT INDYCAR SERIES

News Conference

Monday, August 28, 2023

Bobby Rahal

Juri Vips

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: With just two races remaining in the NTT INDYCAR SERIES season, the first one comes up this coming Sunday. Back-to-back-to-back weekends for the NTT INDYCAR SERIES schedule right now. It's the BitNile.com Grand Prix of Portland this coming Sunday.

Just over an hour ago Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing with an announcement that driver Juri Vips will be making his INDYCAR SERIES debut when he will drive the No. 30 Honda-powered Dallara for the team.

Vips made his way through the Formula Series overseas and recently had a couple of tastes of INDYCAR with the test for the team at Sebring last October and then once again at Barber Motorsports Park last March.

The 23-year-old from Estonia joins us this afternoon, as does co-owner Bobby Rahal. Thanks, guys.

First of all, Bobby, we'll start with you. I know you've had a couple of looks at Juri. What do you think about this young man?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I think Juri is just a very nice, young guy. We were introduced to him a couple of years ago. I mean, it's no secret that he made a mistake and paid a huge price, but people in Europe who I knew were very, very complimentary about him as a driver and as a person.

This mistake was a single mistake. Unfortunately, as we all know, Juri paid a huge price for that and lost his position in the Red Bull system, which he was the preeminent junior driver at the time.

In fact, it's kind of interesting that his partner who was with him at the time, Liam Lawson, just drove the AlphaTauri, the Red Bull B team at the Dutch Grand Prix. That's kind of interesting.

We got to meet Juri. A person I respect a great deal in Europe gave him a great -- from a driving standpoint, gave

me a great evaluation of him, and we thought it would be worth giving him a shot.

So he did a test for us at Sebring in 2021, I believe it was, and then, of course, also at Barber this last year. I think for us, I guess I'm -- as I said, Juri is a good person and made a huge mistake.

Has really I think atoned for it through some of the programs, diversity training programs, that he's been involved with both in England and here in the United States. In fact, the same organization that Kyle Larson went to, and we felt that they were very good in their field, and Juri has been going through that program. I think he has completed it now.

So, as I said, I think Juri for many years he has known he made a big mistake, and he has paid for it, but now he's trying to come back. So we're pleased to give him that second chance I think.

He has shown us enough for us to take that chance, you know, to give him a shot, and he has certainly worked hard to correct the mistake that he made. So we're excited about him joining the team for these last two races, and hopefully he'll do well.

No pressure, Juri; right?

JURI VIPs: No pressure.

THE MODERATOR: Juri, welcome to the NTT INDYCAR SERIES. Your thoughts on joining a team that has a lot of great history and certainly a win this year, Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing. Certainly not wasting any time with your first race in just six days, but getting a shot, getting back in the car, it's going to be special for you, I'm sure.

JURI VIPs: Exactly. So I've been out of the car for a while. I just did a test this year back in March in Barber, so there's been a lot of anticipation for this event, but you know, to finally get back in the car.

Just honestly really grateful, really grateful for the opportunity that Bobby and Team Rahal has given me. Yeah, just overwhelmed with emotion at the moment.



THE MODERATOR: Understandable for sure. Let's go ahead and open it up for questions.

Q. Hey, Bobby, congratulations on today's news. It's fantastic. You are on a bit of momentum with Christian having won this season, and Graham did really well at the Indy GP. What do you put that down to?

BOBBY RAHAL: I would say, first off, thank you. I think we've still got a ways to go on ovals. As you saw this past weekend, we were okay, but you got to be a lot better than okay to win on the ovals. So we have our work to do.

But on the road course I think, for example, at Indy GP a couple of years ago when we did the one-off with Christian, he was I think fourth on the grid, almost put it on pole. So we've kind of always had a good feel for that circuit and things we learned there.

Certainly you looked at Toronto, of course. That was a great victory for Christian, a great race for us.

Then Indy GP, again, having the front row. That was really special. Graham really drove a fantastic race, did everything he could to win, and was unlucky with the early yellow that seemed to take forever to end and rewarded others.

So I think on the road racing side and street racing side we've been I guess closer to where we needed to be. That made that jump. Maybe we're three-quarters of the way there. It's certainly come together a little bit more this year.

We're certainly looking forward to Portland and Laguna because we think they're going to be a lot like -- last year we were good at Portland. Graham finished fifth in the race. Christian was running first or second, and a lot of that race he made a little mistake.

So we're really looking forward to that. Of course, we're going to continue to try to improve ourselves on the road courses and the street courses, but for us our major effort over the course -- well, since May in my what I call the Indy recovery plan was to figure out -- put us back on the front row at Indy.

As I said, it's hard to believe -- this year it would have been hard to believe that we won that race two years earlier. Yeah, a lot of work to do yet, but we're getting there, slowly but surely.

Q. And obviously bringing Juri in is part of that. He has obviously done well in Europe. What do you think he's going to bring to the team both this weekend and

then at Laguna next week?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I know that he and Christian raced together for a number of years, and there's a good relationship there. Obviously we're looking to field the strongest drivers that we can find.

With Graham from we've got a wily veteran who has shown he can run up front. On the front row in now two of the races this year, Mid-Ohio and, of course, Indy.

Christian, we've got youth. Still learning. I mean, he's still a little wet behind the ears, as we would say over here. And, of course, now with Juri he is getting thrown into the deep end a bit, but I have confidence in him, and he's going to be lucky because he's going to have two great teammates that can help ease that transition.

It's all about our future, and we've asked Juri to participate in these races because we think that highly of him.

Q. For yourself, Juri, obviously you're going into a team who have great experience with Graham and with Christian. What do you expect to learn from the guys over the next couple of weeks?

JURI VIPS: A lot, to be honest. The cars, essentially they are quite similar downforce, quite similar in horsepower than F-2, which I have decent amount of experience in, but there's so many differences. It's a completely different racing series.

I've already learned quite a lot. I've gone to a couple of races and been around the factory a bit. So I feel like pretty integrated in the team as much as I could be, and definitely Christian and Graham have helped me with that, that transition phase.

I'm sure I'll learn a lot during the race weekend, but definitely having driven the car, having spent a bit of time here in the U.S. has helped me with that transition because it is a completely different racing series to F2, completely different demands.

Yeah, I'm really looking forward to it.

Q. First question is for Bobby. How much of this announcement for today comes down to timing with the next two tracks coming up? I know obviously you probably didn't want to send Juri on an oval for his first start, but is this something you've had maybe in the works for the last week or so, and is this more of a timing of the two tracks coming up for this announcement now?



BOBBY RAHAL: Well, I think there's a couple of things about these next two events. One that I think is a real value to us is the series test at Laguna Seca on Thursday before the race. So it's more than just getting time at the two events themselves, but it's getting a full day at Laguna in advance of the race.

I think the amount of knowledge and comfort and everything that a driver needs to do his best, I think that is going to help that process a lot.

I think Portland, that's going to be a challenge, there's no question about it, because you don't have that much practice time before you go into qualifying. As we all know, qualifying is so intense and so close.

I mean, you don't have to be far off the pace, and you could be in the last one-third of the grid, so I do think there's going to be a lot of demands this coming weekend.

But having the two races weekend-to-weekend, having the test day, to me all of that made a lot of sense. And, of course, Juri is from the road racing background, so going to an oval, especially an oval like St. Louis, would have been really I think an unbelievable experience never having done one before.

But I would also say that I thought Conor did a super job for us this last weekend and really was very appreciative of his efforts. A real pro. So when we had three races to go, we just felt that that was the best solution to those three races.

Q. You mentioned a couple of years ago with Christian you got a tip from over there, overseas. Got a phone call about taking a look at him. What led Juri to you, this route that's -- what did you see with him?

BOBBY RAHAL: As I said, Juri came up on our radar screen by a friend of mine in Europe. Of course, this was after the mistake that he made, after it was public, after he was released from his Red Bull contract.

So he was kind of -- although the team that he drove for knew him well, and they certainly believed that, yes, it was a mistake, but that was not emblematic of him as a person, and they still ran him the remainder of that year. That was the Hitech team.

Anyway, I spoke to some friends that had worked with Juri, and they were just very unbelievably impressed and supportive of him, with his skills. Knowing that, I know that, as I said earlier, also Juri had already gone through diversity training in London with Dr. Lateesha Osbourne.

I think he knew there was a lot more to do beyond that even, but we felt that certainly all the response we were getting from people who had been with him was very positive.

Obviously sad that he made a mistake of this nature, and he paid a huge price for it, I might add, but was impressed because he set about correcting that and learning from that and continues to this day.

So as I said, the opinions I got about him as a driver were extremely high, and he did do that test for us, and we were quite pleased with it at Sebring.

So I guess I personally feel and I think Mike Lanigan, our team, feels that everybody makes mistakes, and you have to do what you can to repair and learn from those mistakes, but everybody deserves a second chance. I certainly feel strongly about that, so that's why he is here.

Q. Juri, I'm just curious, you mentioned this is your first race in over a year. What is your nerve level like coming into a series as challenging as INDYCAR, but I also assume it has to be exciting too to join a field of this strength?

JURI VIPS: To be honest, I haven't. Maybe once I get there I'll start feeling them, but at the moment there is almost no -- there's excitement, obviously, because I just haven't been in a car for so long, and I haven't raced for so long.

But nerves are almost zero at this stage because I have so much to prepare and so much to do with media and with the engineers, simulators, and stuff. It's organizing all of that that's on my mind now, so it's almost like I feel like I don't have time to be nervous at the moment.

I think that might change once I get to the track obviously because it has been a while, and it's such a competitive series, so yeah we'll need to do well.

Q. Final question: Just curious what your impressions are of INDYCAR. You said you've been to a couple of races and been in the sim. What's your thoughts of this series so far?

JURI VIPS: I really like it so much. When you come to a race weekend, it's just such a different atmosphere. Like, the paddock is very open. The fans get to see the cars, see the drivers, be really close to them. Be like -- I don't know how to say -- maybe immersed, I think, in the experience much more.

Yeah, the racing is awesome. That's one side that I really

like about it. You get such close racing. It's very hard here, but when you watch the races, they're super exciting.

So, yeah, that's the appeal I have for INDYCAR, and yeah, I think it's just an awesome series.

Q. Bob, let's open with a couple for you. You've got a great opportunity that a lot of free agents want to claim in this No. 30 RLL Honda of yours. I know you all have been keen on Juri for a while now. What are you hoping to see from him at Portland and at Laguna? And if he does well, does he have a legitimate chance, among the others you're looking at, to maybe land this seat next year?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, first off, as you know or as you suspect, my friend, that we're talking to a number of drivers out there, probably like just about most of the teams I suppose.

In terms of where Juri is in that mix, I think first thing is first, and that's let's go do the races and let's see how they sort themselves out.

Clearly, we have an interest in Juri, just as we have an interest in others, but it's all about let's just get through this and then go through the process.

We still have some sponsors to sign, so there's still a lot of work to do, but we're just glad we're able to be in a position to give Juri this chance. And who knows? Somebody else may want him if they see and if he does as good as I think he can do.

But first thing is first. Then after Labor Day -- I shouldn't say Labor Day. After September 15th we'll see where everything falls out.

Q. Bob, tell me about young talent like Christian Lundgaard, Juri here as well. You see if we're to bring a young driver into INDYCAR, pretty much the traditional path was going to be coming up through the American open-wheel ladder, Indy Lights (indiscernible). We're seeing more and more, Callum Illot, Alex Palou. It's F2. It could be some other series, but tell me what you are seeing about young drivers like Juri coming over here and Christian where you go, Okay, you don't have that oval component, but they sure are training these kids in F2 at a really high level where they can transfer almost immediately. What are you seeing about this new dynamic because obviously your team is one of the leaders in showing this to the world.

BOBBY RAHAL: Yeah. Well, I think, first thing, I still

believe that there's good Americans out there. I think Kyle Kirkwood is a prime example of that who has come up through the U.S. ranks and is showing pretty great -- two-race winner this year. You know, on his day he is really quite good. So I don't think it's doom and gloom for the U.S. system.

Certainly, I think Road to Indy or INDY NXT, that these are -- we're already seeing guys get out of Indy Lights cars and immediately be pretty competitive, which is good.

I will say, though, that there are so many young guys in Europe in F2 from all over the world racing there. If you look at the grid in an F2 race, it's like a United Nations.

The professionalism, the expectation, the demands both on the track and off the track are such that these young guys, like Christian, these young guys come over, and they're pretty savvy on and off the track. I think it would be foolish for us to not look into F2.

And, as you say, you have Callum over here. You've got Palou that was there. Of course, Pato was in F2. Christian, as I said, and now Juri. There's a long list of guys that are already coming from Formula 2, and I expect there to be a lot more because the opportunities for them in Europe are so small. These are good drivers, and they just never get a real chance.

I suspect that in the future as a team owner you've got to look at Formula 2 as a prime training level to get to INDYCAR.

Q. Juri, for you just looking at social media since the announcement, I'm very happy that Bob and Mike Lanigan and Dave Letterman are of the mind that folks deserve a second chance. I can tell you that looking at social media after the announcement, a lot of folks here, a lot of INDYCAR fans that aren't necessarily happy to hear this are asking, has he learned? Bobby said you've learned a lot, but would welcome hearing from you. Having gone through made a mistake, definitely one that would alter one's life, now that you have spent a year of your life or so dealing with repercussions, who are you? How are you different? Tell me about this person INDYCAR fans are going to get to meet this weekend in Portland? How is he different than the person maybe they read about a year ago when everything went sideways for you?

JURI VIPS: Yeah. So I basically -- after everything happened last year, I asked my team at the time, Hitech, to do some kind of course for me to understand what's offensive and what's not because I made this huge mistake without knowing it's such a big mistake. I thought it was

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

just a swear word that I was saying.

Yeah, I wanted to know more about it, first of all, just so nothing like this can happen again because I don't know what else I don't know, you know?

Then, yeah, I had a lot of time to reflect on who I disappointed. I had so many fans, so many people cheering for me, so many people that helped me through my career, and I just threw it all away because I wasn't -- before this I wasn't interested in learning about anything. All I cared about was racing.

That's I guess why I thought the word that I said was a swear word and not way worse than it actually is. Yeah, since that I've learned a lot.

I took two sensitivity courses. One in the U.K., and we decided with Rahal here it's good to do a refresher course as well. Things might be a little bit different in the U.S., it's a different company, and that's definitely helped as well just to get a different perspective on things. I definitely learned more in the RISE Program that I just completed here.

I feel like I have grown as a person, but yeah, I am really grateful for the second chance, and I completely understand all the outrage. Now that I understand what the word means, it's completely justifiable, and I am very sorry for everybody that I've hurt.

Q. First of all for Juri, I'm glad to see you again in racing competition, and I'm just looking forward to look what you've done in these two races. My question goes on that way. Are you worried about these two races after one year of not competing? What is your motive in these two races that you have?

JURI VIPS: I didn't quite -- the connection was a little poor for me. Did I understand correctly that it was, am I nervous for the two races, and what are my hopes?

Q. Yes, if you are worried about these two races after one year of not competing.

JURI VIPS: Yeah. So, I mean, to answer that question, I am doing everything I possibly can to be as ready as I could, and I know that once I start driving out of pit lane I'm not going to be as comfortable as I am on any other race weekend. I know it's going to take a little bit of time to catch up and build confidence in the race car.

But, yeah, I'm worried a little bit just because I haven't done it in so long, but to be honest, I think it's all going to go really well.

Once I get confidence, I'm not worried at all, but it's just -- yeah, I just need some laps with the car because I haven't driven at all for a long time. Yeah, just need some laps. Need to build the confidence up.

As soon as I do, that, I'm not worried at all. I think the car should be quite good on both these surfaces that I'm doing. Yeah, not too worried.

Q. Speaking about the drivers that you will find in these two races, there is some former teammates in Formula 2, especially Marcus Armstrong. Have you had any conversations with him about INDYCAR?

JURI VIPS: I've actually talked a while because both two tests that I did for Rahal actually he was there as well, so the Sebring test I did last year he was with Dale Coyne I believe at the time, and then he was at Barber as well.

I've had some chats with him about the car and about everything. He is loving the life here. Yeah, I had some good chats with him. He just found out, I guess as well today, that I am doing the last couple of races, but yeah, I've kept in touch with Marcus.

Q. One question for Bobby. Bobby, if Juri has a really good performance in these two races, have you had any thought about renewing Juri for a full-time in 2024?

BOBBY RAHAL: As I said a little while ago, clearly we're running Juri because we feel and all the reports we received and opinions by people, we feel he can be very competitive. Time will tell.

I think it's a lot to expect -- for people to expect that he'll be right on the pace for these first two races because, like he said, he hasn't raced anything for over a year or maybe a year and a half, and it is a different world.

But we saw enough from the test that we thought it's worth -- if he was going to really extend himself to learn and to, in effect, atone for his mistake, that we thought, well, we should give him that chance.

So that's where we're at right now. We'll see, but clearly his record in Europe was such that he was one of the top guys. No different than Callum. No different than, as you said, Marcus or Christian. They're all from the same kind of school, finishing school, which Formula 2 is to a large extent. We'll see. We'll just see.

Q. Looking at the two tracks you have ahead of you now, like Portland and Laguna Seca, I'm sure you've



been watching footage of the races there. What are your impressions of those two tracks?

JURI VIPS: Really cool. Portland just looks like this cool, old-school, pretty high-speed track. Yeah, looks like a really, really cool layout.

I think it's good for racing as well. You've got two long straights, one pretty much after the other. So I think all the races that I've seen there look really cool, and I think to do just one lap for qualifying also looks like a cool track.

Laguna is going to be nice, especially now that they've repaved it. You are hearing different kind of numbers, but I think there were some cars running three, four seconds quicker.

So I think Laguna is, anyway, such a historic track, so it's cool to tick that off the list. I think it will be especially nice because it's going to be a lot grippier this year than before.

Q. Now, of course in recent years a number of guys from F2 made the switch to INDYCAR. We spoke to a number of them. Marcus Armstrong called the INDYCAR like wrestling an alligator. Christian Lundgaard was much more like, well, it's almost -- you can really feel it's a Dallara. There's a lot of commonalities with my F2 car. What's your impression been in the runs that you've had so far?

JURI VIPS: Somewhere in between the two. Let me put it this way. It's similar in terms of downforce and power. I think maybe a little bit more on each, so it's a little bit quicker. Feels a bit quicker than F2.

But I think the big difference is the tires. The Pirellis you really had to drive smoothly, couldn't have any oversteer, and just had to be very careful with what you are doing. I feel with the Firestones you can just do anything. You can throw the car around a lot, which I really like.

So that's probably where the alligator term came in from Marcus, but yeah, I think it's similar in ways to F2 in terms of speed and cornering speed. Yeah, the driving style is completely different.

Q. Now, of course, you once were on the road to F1. Given everything that's happened in the past year, where are your F1 ambitions? Do you still harbor them in some way, or are you right now just liking that America is what I want to focus on?

JURI VIPS: At the moment I have no thoughts of F1 at all. I really like it here in the States. I've come to a couple of INDYCAR races now, spent a bit of time here. So I'm

really, really liking INDYCAR and everything about it, America.

It's a very different environment to the F1 environment, and I'm just enjoying it so much. I've forgotten about F1 a bit. I don't have any ambitions towards that at the moment, but yeah, trying to get a full-time drive for next year.

Q. First question to Bobby. Now, you mentioned earlier there was a need to get one or two sponsors still. How significant is this news in terms of the Leaders Circle payments because I think it is currently 23rd when we're looking at the full-time cars, and it's the top 22 that get the payouts. Is putting Juri in part of a plan for that?

BOBBY RAHAL: Well, this last weekend we actually are in that top-22 group. Remember, one of Chip's cars, the fourth car in owners' points is not eligible for Leaders Circle, so that opens things up.

Having said that, we're not breathing easier because it is very close still. I mean, we're going racing either way, but it would sure be nice to be part of the Leaders Circle group. And that was an expectation that, frankly, I took for granted going into this year.

Then clearly we've been struggling a little bit to get the points in order to do that. So Conor did a nice job for us and got us kind of back in the game, but there's two races left, as you mentioned, and we've got to really do a good job in those two races.

Q. If it ends up not being in the Leaders Circle, will it definitely still be a full-time entry next year even if you don't get those over the line?

BOBBY RAHAL: Yep, yep.

Q. And to Juri, a few quick questions. Around this time last year, you said it was looking really difficult to get a race seat for 2023. At what point during the offseason did you actually stop looking for a seat in F2 and start switching your focus to INDYCAR?

JURI VIPS: I never looked for a seat in F2 for this year. So, yeah, it was looking difficult just to get any, like -- we were looking more towards INDYCAR, but yeah, it was looking pretty difficult for that.

I ended up having a couple of offers through some Endurance racing, DTM, and stuff like this full-time this year, but I would rather take a chance with INDYCAR because the thing for me is if I look at myself long-term, that's the series I want to be in. That's what I want to do.

I think once you sort of commit yourself to a program in GTs, Endurance or something, you are kind of committed there, and it's hard then to make the transition after.

So I'm really grateful for Bobby for this opportunity because, yeah, I want to prove myself, and I want to stay on the grid here.

Q. Last year you were the third best qualifier in F2, but in terms of futurist points only 12th. So on the Sundays, if it was Sundays, losing a lot of points. I know Hitech are bad at pit stops. You had that weird penalty at Monzo that the steward had to apologize. With the way you kind of lost the (indiscernible) towards the end of the season and having this huge break, were you able to do some kind of offseason work to kind of figure out what had gone wrong last year and how you could have applied it if you were back in a full-time race seat this season?

JURI VIPS: Definitely. Once everything sort of kicked off last year, I didn't have time to reflect. It was just one race after the other. It was pretty hectic, the F2 schedule at this point.

So, yeah, that obviously affected my performance as well, but yeah, we had a couple of races still where that got away. I think Red Bull Ring we should have definitely won, and then Monzo, yeah, was probably a podium without that mistake from the steward. There were a couple of good ones too.

Then offseason -- well, I think there was a two-month gap to Abu Dhabi. I had a lot of time to reflect and sort of just try and -- yeah, because at this time I was really struggling and stuff.

Yeah, it wasn't a great time, but it was more -- it was more I would say I had time to reflect once the season was fully over after Abu Dhabi is when I really took some time off, disconnected and, yeah, just spent some time with family and friends.

That's really helped me as well just to sort of regroup, refocus, and get serious again. Yeah, I think I'm in a much better place than where I was last year, and I think I'm ready for this.

Q. In addition to the sensitivity training and just feeling like you're learning and understanding of this, now you've got a platform of being in one of the biggest racing series on the planet, and this focus is going to be on you because of what's happened. Are you going to use it to kind of spread this education

yourself because it's a mistake you've learned from, and you've got this opportunity to make sure others don't make the same mistake.

JURI VIPS: Yeah, yeah, definitely. I haven't made full plans of what I'm going to do exactly, but I do -- when I was going through this program, it was Andrew Mac Intosh who helped me with this. He is from the RISE program that I just completed.

He really mentioned that I should sort of spread my knowledge of what I've learned and stuff, and I really agree with him.

I just completed the course, so I haven't exactly thought of what I'm going to do, but yeah, I think people have learned already because they've seen what I've done, but I do want to spread what I've learned from the sensitivity programs.

Yeah, just be a model citizen from now on. You know, leave the past behind me and grow. That's my main thing.

THE MODERATOR: I know it's a quick turnaround after the announcement and everybody is busy certainly this time of year, so thank you all for hopping on very quickly as we look ahead to Portland coming up in just a few days.

JURI, thank you so much. Nice getting to know you. Bobby, thank you.

BOBBY RAHAL: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: BITNILE.COM Grand Prix of Portland is Sunday. Coverage begins at 3 Eastern on NBC, Peacock, and the INDYCAR Radio Network. Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

